

DEPARTMENT OF DEFENSE BLOGGERS ROUNDTABLE WITH GENERAL KEVIN BERGNER, CHIEF OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS, U.S. ARMY VIA TELECONFERENCE FROM FORT BELVOIR, VIRGINIA DATE: SATURDAY, SEPTEMBER 20, 2008

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CHARLES "JACK" HOLT (chief, New Media Operations, Office of the Secretary of Defense for Public Affairs): General Bergner, are you with us?

GEN. BERGNER: Hello, Jack.

MR. HOLT: Hello, sir. How are ya? All right. Well, and welcome home.

GEN. BERGNER: Thank you. I was just thinking to myself, the last time I talked to you I was in Baghdad. It's a real pleasure to be a Fort Belvoir, Virginia. But I'm trying to figure out how you got to go to Las Vegas for this. (Laughter.)

MR. HOLT: You'll have to talk to Lindy about that one. (Laughs.)

GEN. BERGNER: Okay. MR. HOLT: Well, thank you for joining us today, sir. And I guess this is, what, your first official public act as the new chief of Public Affairs for the United States Army, isn't it?

GEN. BERGNER: It is indeed. In fact, I appreciate you mentioning that because there is some significance to that. I had said I'd like to get my feet on the ground as the chief of Public Affairs before I get more broadly involved in speaking on behalf of the Army and interacting. When Lindy came forward with this opportunity, I said, okay, I'm ready, let's go. So I really do appreciate this. And I welcome the opportunity.

As you know, from our relationship when I was in Baghdad, I have done some blogger roundtables in the past. I found in the course of doing those that I sometimes learned as much if not more from the questions and the perspectives that I was offered as perhaps those who were participating in the roundtable learned from me. So I really do value the interaction and the opportunity to hear the perspectives of mil bloggers, in particular.

And I really want to thank you and Roxy Merritt (ph) for your leadership within the Department of Defense in helping organize these.

And I want to say thanks to Lindy Kyzer as well, who is helping our Army move beyond the comfort zone and to get out on the edge of it and to try to help us move forward and better interact, both so that the new media has the

voice of the Army in it but just as much so that the Army has the perspective and the insight that come from military bloggers, in particular.

I really would welcome questions and insights. And I'll kind of make my comments as we go along. But I think this is more important for people to be able to ask me questions than it is for me to make a long comment.

So over to you for questions.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much.

And if you've got a question, just kind of come on up.

John.

Q I'm going to jump in first, sir. My name is John Donovan. I'm a retired soldier. I blog at Castle Argghhh. I live just outside out Leavenworth, Kansas. And when I told my father I was going to come here and help moderate the panel that you and the secretary are speaking on, he charged me to come in with one question. And this is the perspective of a two-war veteran, (seven ?) Purple Hearts, Silver Star, Distinguished Flying Cross, than me, his son, 24 years of service and then my son. Which is, what's up with the mall guard suit with the change to the new class B uniform? My father's jaw dropped. But more damaging for ascensions command, my son fell down laughing. And people in here are laughing. It is funny, but it's also a serious question, sir. I was just wondering, now that the formal release of that has been out what the feedback from the field has been.

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah. Well, I think your perspective and that of your father are things all of us take very seriously because we have enormous respect for those who have served and those who continue to be great advocates for the Army. At the same time, the Army leadership and those folks who work on uniform issues have made those decisions. And as you pointed out, we have formally announced the guidelines and the implementation plans to transition to that uniform.

And it's, you know, something we take seriously because we know that the uniform is one of the most public and personal ways that our soldiers identify themselves and are identified. So it's something we take very seriously. The blue uniform has a great history, and it has an important part in our Army's lineage and the traditions up to today.

And I don't know if you that one of the other components that was behind that thought was to simplify the number of uniforms and reduce the number of uniform items that soldiers dealt with. So there is some logic behind it. I know that there are people who are reacting strongly to it. The sergeant major of the Army, I would point out, has pretty courageously and directly engaged the field, has sought their comments, has sought their input and recommendations on how to evolve the adjustments that will be made.

So change in the Army is tough, and it is one of those things where people react very strong. But the Army leadership has made a decision to move forward, and so that's the direction that we are going.

MR. HOLT: All right.

C.J.

Q Sir, how you doing? Can you hear me? They didn't give me a booster chair. (Laughter.)

GEN. BERGNER: I hear you loud and clear.

Q Okay. My name is C.J. Grisham, I'm an active duty first sergeant. I blog at A Soldier's Perspective. And with today's battlefield being different than many others, we're fighting both a kinetic fight, but more importantly and probably more pertinent to you is that we're fighting kind of an online/media war as well. So I was wondering if you guys would be willing to recognize that and issue an outstanding volunteer blogging medal. (Laughter, applause.) GEN. BERGNER: One of things I learned early in my life that has helped me navigate some of the most difficult and challenging issues is always listen to your first sergeant. (Laughter.) I will listen very carefully to that idea. You know, it is, honestly, it is one of those areas where -- and I go back to a guy I used to work for in the Army. He said, you know, Kevin, one of the challenges we have in this institution, an institution that is large, that is very tradition bound for all the right reasons, but one of the challenges we have is getting a new idea into the Army.

But even harder than that is getting some of the old ideas out of the Army. And I think that that is a pretty good articulation of the challenges that we will have and continue to have to work towards in the new media. And so our ability to help move forward and, at the same time, get rid of some of our old think is really the nature of the challenge. So we'll figure out a way to recognize those who are doing this well and that are contributing, contributing to helping tell the Army's story honestly.

You know, one of the things that struck me as I was thinking about this forum, and you'll remember this because you're a first sergeant today, in Operation Desert Shield and Desert Storm, I remember sitting in the desert as a young captain and major in the 24th Infantry Division.

And I know I called home three times during nine months -- once when I got there, once at Christmastime and once once we returned to forward area. And during that time, letters from home and to home generally took between two weeks to a month or maybe even more.

And now we're in an era of where, obviously, all of that time has been compressed, the immediacy. But more importantly it's the personal aspect of what bloggers are able to convey. No one can do it with the same personal insights, the perspective and the texture that comes from those dialogues. So that's what is so meaningful to the American people.

And it's so important to the Army because all of us want to be able to have soldiers tell their story as only a soldier can do. So I got it, first sergeant. Thanks.

Q Hey, thank you, sir. And just so you know, my Marine fellow blogger there told me, we get a medal for blogging that he's not going to write anymore. (Laughter.)

(Off mike commentary.)

That's a good thing. Take care, sir.

GEN. BERGNER: Thanks, first sergeant.

(Off mike commentary.)

MR. HOLT: (Laughs.) All right.

Bev.

Q Hello, Mr. Secretary. I blog as FBL and one of the sites is on John Donovan's site. Earlier this year when Major General Lynch was deployed with the 3rd ID to Iraq, I had the chance to interview him, his other generals and a number of his senior officers. And that was a tremendous opportunity to look at things as I come at it from a civilian perspective. And it not only educated me but educated a lot of readers on my own personal blog who also were coming at things from just a civilian and military support kind of perspective.

And when I went to look and do background to prepare for these interviews, I found that he had a great media presence, that the 3rd ID had a wonderful media presence online, and that really helped me to formulate my questions and learn more than I ever could have imagined about what the 3rd ID was doing.

When I went to go interview some other commanders, though, I was stymied to find that I couldn't find any background on their AO or what their units were doing or anything like that in the area. And I realized the Major General Lynch was rather unique in the way that he had reached out, not just on the Internet but to local radio, local TV stations. There was reams of information out there.

And so I'm wondering if there is any effort to encourage other commanders and the large division level to have more, I guess, forward-leaning media engagement so that they are doing the kinds of things that Major General Lynch did.

GEN. BERGNER: That is a great point. And I would say, first of all, your perspective on that clearly suggests we need to do more and do it better in working with our commanders in the field to help them have some insights that will give them a better basis to talk about their unit, their AOR, their activities and so forth.

You know, it's interesting, we're all products of our experience. And interestingly enough, Lieutenant General Rick Lynch had served as the deputy chief of staff for Strategic Effects in Multinational Force Iraq when I was on my first tour in Iraq up in Mosul. And so he had, by virtue of that experience, he had encountered all of those issues, all of the opportunities really to better communicate and to better share the information.

So I think as a division commander, he reflected that as a product of his experience, having already worked closely with the media and with the new media in understanding the importance that that has to not only the purposes you mentioned but certainly for the Army's ability to tell its story.

So having been the spokesman in Iraq during most of his deployment to the Multinational Division Center, I can absolutely share your perspective, absolutely agree. I mean, he clearly has been out there setting the standard in terms of taking the initiative and broadly providing information about his troopers, what they're doing and about their units.

Q Thank you.

Q General, this is Ward Carroll, the editor of Military.com. You know, we've dealt with you before on the bloggers roundtables, as you've said. And now you're taking the lead to be the head PAO for the Army. What are some of your specific initiatives you think that you would take on, like, right out of the chute with respect to new media? And then beyond that with respect to the way the Army is getting its message out, can you share with us some of your, you know, your first-blush ideas of how you're going to do something different? Or are you satisfied that it's going great, and you're just going to carry out the plan of the day?

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah. Well, thanks for asking the question. And those of you that have served in the Army and covered it like you have know I've only been onboard for a couple of weeks. So anybody who's been onboard a couple of weeks will caveat what he says by saying, you know, I owe it to everybody here to kind of dig a little deeper, look a little further before making too many pronouncements.

But let me just give you a couple of perspectives, if I could. The first one is we really do have some cultural challenges. It is all about getting new ideas into the Army but also getting some of the old ideas out of the Army. And that's going to be a little bit of a generational challenge for us. It's one that I've seen improvement on, even in just the last four to five years. But it's one that we clearly have a lot more work to do.

I think what we have going for us on that front is the secretary and the chief are both firmly in the position to help change that culture, and they're both committed to it.

I think the other thing that we have going for us is our operational experience. You know, you just mentioned the efforts that Rick Lynch used in the 3rd Infantry Division to share information. That's a product of his experience. And that experience is a product of our operational service recently.

So what we're doing operationally is actually a great forcing function. It's helping us to take on these issues at a pace and on a scale that we might not otherwise. And even though that isn't, in itself, sufficient, it is a good forcing function.

And I think there are other people out there. I notice Austin Bay is part of your collaboration. And Austin has been sort of a sherpa for the Army's future effort. He has been helping the Army look into the future and expand our thinking for a number of years. I used to work with him when I was a lieutenant colonel and colonel on some of the Army futures projects. And so I think those are the kinds of things that will help us take on the culture and adjust and adapt to new opportunities.

The other way is with guys like Lieutenant Colonel Kevin Orata (ph) and Ricky Sims who run our Soldiers Media Center and are really the guys behind the technical, the back end, if you will, of where we hang information and how we organize it, whether it's a Twitter account or 3,500 images on Flickr or YouTube postings or our presence at MySpace and Facebook. Those guys are helping create the technical linkages which then will expand our capability to interact.

And then you guys and gals really are a key part of this with your blogs. And so that's why this dialogue is important enough to send Lindy Kaiser out there. And it's important for Kevin Orata (ph) and Kathy Abbott (sp), who's the head of our media relations division, to monitor calls like this and to hear firsthand the things, the issues that you have and the perspectives you have.

So I think it's a combination of operational experience. It's certainly dependent upon the commitment of the secretary and the chief, which is certainly there. And it's going to depend on this good relationship. That's why we would make the time and value the opportunity today to interact with you firsthand.

I think the one lesson learned I take from this is next year I'm going to make Lindy take me with her to Las Vegas -- (laughter) -- not just because it's a great place but certainly because it's more important for us to physically be out there and interact with you as well.

So that's what's on my mind initially as the chief of Public Affairs. And I take the challenge, and I'm heartened because I see so many of the other leaders I work with in the Army who are certainly taking the challenge. General Schoomaker, who's the surgeon general, General Van Antwerp, who runs the Army Corps of Engineers, those guys are engaged and working inside this domain and providing a personal example of how to help shape the future. So I'm very thankful for them and their commitment to this.

Thanks, again, good question. And let me just close by making an offer. I would welcome your thoughts on what I ought to focus on and how I can better address some of these issues as the chief of Public Affairs.

So let's just make this the beginning of a more continuous and consistent dialogue which Jack Holt and Lindy Kaiser will help frame for us.

Q Yeah, General, I think the first takeaway that we've had today on that front is we'd like to have the bloggers roundtables be more tactical in nature. You know, we want to hear from the mid-grade enlisted side and the mid-grade officer side. And I think those would be more compelling stories for the blogs. You know, it's great to talk to O-6s but, you know, we'd like to sort of get more of the sights and sounds from the front than we are just in general.

GEN. BERGNER: That's a good point. And I will take that one aboard.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir.

And Grimm, I think we've got time for one more question here.

Q Well, this actually is good timing for this. This is Grimm of BlackFive.Net. I wanted to ask you about the interagency piece of this. As you know, military blogs are very good at knocking down bad stories in the media, that we just have the cultural knowledge, the technical knowledge or whatever to recognize when a story can't be true or is unlikely to be true and call attention to it, which is fine for the American press, but it's not getting out into the parts of the world where the terrorists are doing their recruitment and where their social networks are.

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah.

Q So the military is watching the military blogs, that's great. You notice when we do things. But what we need to see happening is you taking that and getting it to State Department, to some version of the U.S. Information Agency like we used to have, some interagency board, getting it translated into these local languages and getting it put out. Can you talk a little bit about any efforts you know of that might be useful in that regard.

GEN. BERGNER: Yeah. Grimm, you hit on a great point, and it's one that is a challenge, not just for the Army or the other services but for us as a nation. You know, there is another angle to that, another line of operation that's useful, and it's one that we used to be engaged in, and I know we still -- (inaudible) -- and that is helping our host nation and our friends who are spokesmen develop their own capability to engage in that question because they are the best spokesmen, if you will, they're really the best ones to articulate this in their world.

And so Iraqis in this mode or others in this mode are the way to, I think, help better shape their own perspective. And so we are working on that. We used to have great relationships with my Iraqi counterparts. And they have their own style, they have their own culture that has to be considered in all of this as well.

The interagency piece of it is one that we are engaged in. And it is one that, just by the nature of the interagency, it tends to be challenged by the difference in speed of action that's necessary to compete in the information world. But it is one that we're engaged in, and that's one that in fact Kathy Abbott (sp) is participating in a session on Monday and Tuesday specifically focused on the interagency component to this.

MR. HOLT: All right, sir. Thank you very much. And we're out of time here. We do appreciate you being with us and for your first outing as the chief of Public Affairs for the Army. We thank you for being with us here for the Milblog Conference 2008. (Applause.)

GEN. BERGNER: Jack, thanks very much.

And thank you, all, very much. And I wish you all the best for a successful fest of your conference. And I really look forward to hearing the results of it. Thanks, again.

MR. HOLT: All right, thank you.

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